

Oldest-Ever Evidence of Canines Proves Israel's Canaan Dogs Roamed Mideast 9,000 Years Ago

by [Abra Forman](#) | Nov 26, 2017 | [Biblical News](#)



A Canaan dog. (Norsk Kennel Club)

The earliest-ever depictions of man's best friend found in the archaeological record have recently been discovered in Saudi Arabia – and the breed is almost undoubtedly that of the [Canaan dog](#), Israel's national breed.

The Canaan dog, native to the Middle East and specifically ancient Canaan, was used as a guard dog from Israelite times, protecting and herding the ancient Hebrews' camps and flocks of sheep. According to tradition, the Israelites had to leave them behind during the exile, and the breed reverted to the wild.

Throughout the centuries, the Canaan dog survived, occasionally joining Bedouin and [Druze](#) tribes as guard dogs. In the 1930's, before the State of Israel was established, the Haganah – predecessor to the IDF – began using the dogs, captured from the wild, domesticated and trained, as service animals. It was recognized as a breed by Israel in 1963 and became the Jewish State's national dog.

Today, they are pets and guard dogs, with about 2,000-5,000 purebred Canaan dogs in the world, approximately 1,000 of which live in Israel. But according to ancient petroglyphs discovered carved in rock faces in Shuwaymis and Jubbah, desert regions in Saudi Arabia, 9,000 years ago the early Canaan dog was a fierce hunter, working alongside humans to track and kill prey.

A new study in the Journal of Anthropological Archaeology, [“Pre-Neolithic evidence for dog-assisted hunting strategies in Arabia.”](#) states that 147 scenes from the 1,405 rock art panels found “represent the earliest evidence of dogs on the Arabian Peninsula,” and that the dogs depicted “are reminiscent of the modern Canaan dog.” The findings reshape what historians knew about the relationship between humans and dogs in prehistoric times.

Previously, the earliest known depictions of dogs in the archaeological record were found on pottery shards in Iran dating to around 6,000 BCE.

In addition to a deeper understanding of how humans and dogs worked together in Neolithic times, the most surprising discovery, noted the researchers, was that a number of the dogs in the panels were depicted wearing leashes, “the earliest known evidence” of humans leashing canines, showing a “high level of control” over the hunting dogs.



Modern Canaan dogs (Wikimedia Commons)

Panel 134 at Shuwaymis, showing a hunter with two dogs on a leash and three further dogs hunting an equid and its young. (Journal of Anthropological Archaeology)



The practice of leashing was common, according to the rock panels. “The leashes appear to be tethered to the waist of the hunters, leaving their hands free for the bow and arrow,” wrote the researchers. Multiple scenes show hunters pursuing their prey with packs of dogs.





The right side of the panel shows a hunter with 13 dogs, the left side of the panel shows a hunter, a large equid and 8 dogs. (Journal of Anthropological Archaeology)

As for the breed, there was little doubt. “All of the dogs display characteristic pricked ears, short snouts, deeply-angled chests, and a curled tail, appearing to be of the same ‘type’,” the researchers wrote. “These traits bear a remarkable resemblance to the modern Canaan dog, a breed associated with the Levant, but which may have a more ancient ancestry than previously assumed.”

Researchers also pointed out similarities in coloring, specifying a “tick” or “Irish spotting” pattern in the Canaan dog’s coat which is clearly visible in numerous panels.



However, the report notes, the dog's ancestry is "unclear"; they may have originated from non-native dogs imported from the Levant, or "localized domestication" in the Arabian peninsula.



Modern Canaan dogs compared to the rock carvings. (Journal of Anthropological Archaeology)

The most common prey targeted in the hunting scenes were ibex, gazelle and equids (animals in the horse family). Dogs are shown attacking prey, biting their necks, heads and bellies. The researchers also suggest that the dogs were used to chase down and tire wild animals, corner them on cliff ledges, bark to alert human handlers to their presence, or hold them so that the hunters could make a kill.

Canaan dogs are a hardy breed: they have few genetic or health problems and high breed standards, including easy training, vigilance, and a strong survival instinct. With their adoptive families and familiar humans, they are devoted and docile, but with strangers they are defensive and wary. They are territorial and vocal, making them ideal watchdogs.

A dedicated kennel facility in Shaar Hagai, Israel, run by Israeli-American Myrna Shibolet, has been breeding "most of the world's 5,000 existing Canaan dogs" for over four decades, the *Times of Israel* [reported](#). Occasionally, Shibolet went into nature to capture wild Canaan dogs in order to improve her breeding stock. However, the kennel closed last year after Shibolet lost a court battle for her property.

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